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ABSTRACT

At Amarillo College (AC) in Texas, academic advising is provided by certified counselors at the Advising and Counseling Center in conjunction with faculty and staff of the developmental studies department. In addition, all teaching faculty serve as student advisors. During the past 5 years, a number of factors have placed increased demands on the college's counseling and advising services, including increased enrollment; an insufficient number of counselors; a lack of knowledge of or interest in advising among teaching faculty; improved academic placement testing procedures; and the advent of the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP), a state-mandated reading, writing, and mathematics test which students must pass in order to move from remedial to college courses. In fall 1991, in an effort to improve the delivery of student advisement services, AC initiated the Advising Connection, a faculty advisor training program. Faculty volunteers attend a 4-hour (or 3-hour intensive) training session which includes lectures, question-and-answer periods, and computer workshops on using student data files. A brief training review is conducted prior to student registration. Participants in the program are trained to interpret students' scores on placement tests and the TASP test, to advise students into proper remediation or academic classes based on these scores, and to advise various special student populations. Program outcomes have included better student advisement, improved relations among faculty members, and increased understanding of the registration process among faculty. (PAA)

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THE ADVISING CONNECTION
A Training Program for Faculty Advisors

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THE ADVISING CONNECTION
A Training Program for Faculty Advisors

ABSTRACT

The Advising Connection is the title of a faculty advisor training program initiated in the Fall semester, 1991, at Amarillo College, Amarillo, Texas. The program was developed in response to the need for improving student advisement due to increased enrollment, limited numbers of Counselors, lack of knowledge/interest in advising among teaching faculty, improved academic placement testing procedures, and the advent of the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP). Advising Connection training is administered to selected members of the teaching faculty. The program trains participants to correctly interpret students' scores on placement tests and the TASP test, and to advise students into the proper remediation or academic classes based on these scores. Trainees also learn to advise based on the needs of various special student populations. The program has resulted in better student advisement, improved relations among faculty members, and increased understanding of regulations affecting the registration process. Future plans for the Advising Connection include gathering statistical data regarding possible increases in retention, expansion of services during registration periods, and utilizing refresher training to update faculty on changing regulations.

THE ADVISING CONNECTION
A Training Program for Faculty Advisors

The Advising Connection is the title given to a faculty advisor training program initiated in the Fall semester, 1991, at Amarillo College, Amarillo, Texas. The program has succeeded in meeting the goals of providing better student advising, increasing faculty awareness of the importance of advising, and involving teaching faculty more directly in the advising process. The following discussion will describe the factors involved in designing the program, the steps taken to implement faculty training, and the results to date.

SITUATION

Amarillo College, a community college located in the Texas Panhandle, has the philosophy that "the student comes first." The college's Academic Master Plan describes quality teaching and learning as the central core of the institution's purpose, with student access and direction as two of the primary systems supporting that core. Providing quality advising and counseling services for students and prospective students is of primary importance. Counseling services are provided through the Advising & Counseling Center, which is staffed by certified Counselors who hold Master's degrees. Academic advising is provided by the Counselors in conjunction with the faculty and staff of the developmental studies department (ACcess), and with teaching faculty in the various academic and technical divisions. Students have access to Counselors by appointment or on a walk-in basis during day and evening hours, and to other advisors during office hours or by appointment.

PROBLEM

A number of factors surfaced over the past five years which demanded a change in the way academic advising was being provided at Amarillo College. These factors include increased enrollment, limited counseling staff, lack of knowledge/interest in advising among teaching faculty, improved academic placement testing procedures, and the advent of the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP).

Enrollment at Amarillo College has increased dramatically in recent years. Record enrollment was achieved in three successive long semesters - Spring 1991, Fall 1991, and Spring 1992. With budget constraints limiting expansion of personnel, the advising load for the faculty Counselors of the Advising & Counseling Center continued to expand, while timely service to students diminished.

As a matter of policy, Amarillo College requires all teaching faculty, in conjunction with Counselors, to serve as student advisors. As is often the case with employee requirements, there were some who resented this additional burden added to teaching load, committee responsibilities, and the numerous other commitments expected of community college faculty members. Advising issues surrounding AC's academic placement testing, the implementation of new course prerequisites, and the advent of Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) were so overwhelming that a spirit of disinterest in student advising resulted among teaching faculty. This lack of interest also served to increase advising responsibilities for Counselors.

A third factor contributing to advising problems involved the college's academic placement testing. Placement testing has been used as a student advising tool at AC for a number of years. The college's Testing Services has refined procedures and computerized both scoring and student information services to accommodate increased enrollment. The improved efficiency in this area contributed to increased demand for accurate and timely student advisement.

The advent of TASP was another catalyst for seeking improved delivery of academic advising. The Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP), mandated by the Texas legislature in 1988, requires all public colleges and universities in Texas to ensure that students have college level skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Students must demonstrate these skills by passing the TASP examination early in their college career. Students who fail the exam, or a portion of it, are required to maintain continuous enrollment in remediation until the TASP test is passed. Institutions of higher education in Texas are closely audited to assure compliance with TASP testing and remediation requirements, or face a loss of state funding. The advent of the

TASP legislation escalated the need for accurate, intrusive advising to assure student success.

The combination of these factors presented a situation where the need for implementing changes in academic advising was crucial, particularly during registration periods. The Advising Connection was designed to help meet this need.

TREATMENT

The Advising Connection is a program designed to improve the delivery of student advisement services. Its purpose is to directly involve teaching faculty (those who have evidenced a high degree of concern with the advising process) with Counselors in order to provide accurate, timely advising and thus improve student success and retention in college.

Participants for the Advising Connection are chosen by the Director of Advising & Counseling and the Coordinator of Academic Advising (one of the senior Counselors). Due to the newness and the innovative nature of this project, selection of participants to date has been largely subjective. Some of the qualities considered for potential participants include expressed interest, recommendation of Department Chair, and anecdotal information (collected at random) from students which substantiates the faculty members' concern with quality advising. Potential participants are invited, not required, to attend Advising Connection training sessions.

Advising Connection sessions consist of lecture, question/answer periods, and hands-on computer usage with student data files. The sessions are presented by the Director of Advising & Counseling, the Academic Advising Coordinator, and the Coordinator of Testing Services. Subjects covered include the interpretation of scores from TASP and Placement Testing, remedial and/or course requirements based on those scores, and the needs of various student populations. Trainees receive a comprehensive "Advising/Registration Procedures" notebook, name tags with a logo identifying them as Advising Connection participants, and a record of staff development activity which can be used toward requirements for promotion in rank.

Two training formats have been utilized to date: a four-hour session split into two halves, and a more "information intensive" three-hour session. At the time of this article, plans are to continue with the three-hour format.

Two follow-up sessions are included as part of the Advising Connection. They include an Appreciation Social and a brief training review prior to registration periods. Both of these are conducted with minimal formality and on an invitation basis. To date, both have experienced 100% attendance by faculty trainees.

RESULTS

The Advising Connection has met with enthusiastic approval by trainees, administrators, Counselors, and students. It has been called the best advising program in the history of Amarillo College. Some of the more notable results include better student advisement, a spirit of goodwill and understanding between the participants, and an unprecedented bonding between teaching faculty of different disciplines. In addition, a spirit of teamwork between teachers and Counselors has emerged. More teaching faculty have achieved an understanding of TASP and its implications for their students. Since the initial implementation of the Advising Connection, Student Services staff have been asked to participate in discussions and committee work on academic matters from which they had historically been excluded. Appreciation of the work load managed by the Advising & Counseling Center and the Testing Services office has increased.

Future implications for the Advising Connection include: gathering of statistics to document improved retention, utilizing "refresher" sessions to keep faculty abreast of TASP regulations, continuation of search for advising improvements, and strengthening the pride and goodwill of students and faculty at Amarillo College.

(The authors welcome feedback regarding the information contained in this article, as well as other ideas to improve the advising process.)

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